SHERIFF

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The sheriff casts a long--and wide--shadow over the southern literary landscape. A lawman in a lawless region, he is sometimes the heavy and sometimes just plain heavy: an epic hero walking tall or an impotent buffoon weighing down the fun.

The film Walking Tall (1973) provides a well-known example of the first type in Tennessee Sheriff Buford Pusser, a giant defending the law with his courage and a big stick. Similarly equipped with a strong sense of duty and the physical prowess to perform it, Sheriff Campbell, the protagonist in Charles Chesnutt's "The Sheriff's Children" (1899), defends an African American prisoner from vigilantes bent on lynching him. Like many of the literary sheriffs before and after Pusser, however, Campbell is a complicated hero. The revelation that the suspect is his own son, whom he fathered by a slave and then sold, turns him into a majestic lie akin to Nathaniel Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale.

A different sort of public defender, attorney Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) resembles Campbell and Pusser, particularly when he guards the jail where his African American defendant resides. The novel's real sheriff, however, is Heck Tate, who represents an important variation on the dutiful lawman. After deducing that the hermit Boo Radley

saved Finch's son from an attacker, Tate persuades the upright Finch to conceal the details of the case and thus protect Radley's privacy. As the sage lawman who bends the law to keep the peace, Tate resembles Sheriff Bullard in James Dickey's novel Deliverance (1970). Typically brawny, Bullard nevertheless uses his sense to handle a powder keg in his isolated rural county, where a local man has mysteriously disappeared and his brother-in-law suspects a visiting city dweller. Although he, too, suspects the outsider, Bullard calmly arbitrates the dispute and later, admitting that the victim was a lout, gives the urbanite some friendly advice to make himself scarce. Finally, Sheriff Andy Taylor maintains the peace of sleepy Mayberry, North Carolina, in television's Andy Griffith Show (1960-1968) through common sense and leniency, often to the chagrin of his punctilious deputy, Barney Fife.

In his insistence on obeying the letter of the law as well as his ultimate impotence, Barney points to the other major type of southern sheriff. Big in the ego or gut rather than the heart or shoulders, this buffoon often seeks to spoil the fun of a wiser, livelier good old boy, but instead becomes the butt of his jokes. In Johnson Jones Hooper's "The Muscadine Story" (1849), Sheriff Martin Ellis tries to capture the wily Simon Suggs but winds up dangling from a tree over a river, foreshadowing the feckless sheriffs Buford T. Justice in the film Smokey and the Bandit (1977) and Roscoe P. Coltrane in television's The Dukes of

Hazzard (1979-1985). Even more pathetic is Pluto Swint, who, slave to his girth and sheer laziness, lumbers through Erskine Caldwell's novel God's Little Acre (1933) in pursuit of only two ambitions: to become sheriff so that he can sit in the pool hall and call shots and to marry Darling Jill, who continually rejects him.

Whereas Pluto and his ilk are powerless to contain the lawlessness around them, other literary sheriffs are impotent by choice. More apathetic than inept, they abdicate their duties or merely make a show of them. Thus, the obese sheriff in William Faulkner's "The Fire and the Hearth," a section of Go Down, Moses (1942), brings two moonshiners before the commissioner, but wishes only to "get done with this." In "Pantaloon in Black," a later section of the same novel, Sheriff Maydew and his deputies are content to let vigilantes lynch an African American accused of killing a white man, particularly since the victim's family members represent 42 votes. This caricature of the lawless lawman gets humorous treatment in Hooper's Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs (1845), which ends with the plea to elect the shifty Suggs sheriff so that he can "relax his intellectual exertions."

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See also Law and order.